A Capable Beggar Makes from $15.00 to $500.00 a Day

By JOHN D. GODFREY

Mendicancy Officer for the Brooklyn Bureau of Charities

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By JOHN D. GODFREY

I suppose there are few men and women in the United States who have not been "touched" at some time or other by a professional beggar. These extraordinary, often strangely talented, folk ply their trade in every corner of the country. Your own contact with them may have been through some "cripple," sitting beside his battered felt hat on a town or city curbstone; or it may have been through one of the legion of tramps that infest country communities. These are the most common —although far from the most clever —representatives of the trained army that makes a living off the tender hearts of you and your neighbors.

Probably some of the cases seemed so genuine, so deserving, that you felt a glow of warmth as you handed out your dime, quarter, half dollar, or dollar bill. This case, at least, is "on the level," you told yourself. I regret to tear down your illusion; but those of us who have been privileged to study the inside working of the fraternity of alms-seekers know that the chances of your being openly appealed to by a deserving case are practically nil. It is even possible that the object of your charity makes more money a year than you will ever make.

Not a Deserving Case.

For more than twenty years I have been in daily contact with beggars on the streets of Greater New York. Eighteen years of this period I have spent in Brooklyn, a city of homes, which used to be known as "The Beggars' Paradise." I have arrested, investigated, or talked with thousands of mendicants. In their lives I have dug up almost unbelievable romances. I have discovered men and women of extraordinary, though misguided, talent. My sympathy and confidence have been given to many of them—mistakenly, I admit. Looking back on it all, I have to confess that I have yet to uncover a single deserving case.

Three years ago my department sent out investigators, who followed up eight hundred cases of street begging. Not a single case was genuine. In every instance the mendicant was a professional.

Before distributing your "spare change" so freely to the professional panhandler—who stops you on a cold night, let us say, with the story of being out of work, and needing the money for a cup of coffee and a little food—you should consider that the man genuinely in want does not turn to street begging as a relief.

An able-bodied man in real "hard luck" will go to a charitable organization, if he is in a city, and there will usually find opportunity to chop wood for his meals, or do some other work for food and a roof over his head. He may even patronize the bread lines of our larger cities. In a small town or in the country he can almost always find some employment to keep body and soul together until his circumstances improve. . . If he is too proud to do these things, he

is too proud to beg; and he will perhaps starve on the streets, as sometimes happens.

In New York City there are at least five charitable organizations that will take care of any man who has lost a limb, provide him with an artificial limb, teach him to wear it, help him to learn a trade, and find a place where he can work at it. Other cities make similar provisions.

People often ask me how much money beggars make in a day. "It can't amount to a great lot," they say, "so why bother so much about it?" They are amazed to learn the truth.

A capable, experienced beggar—the "flopper," "fit-thrower," "high-heeler," or "throw-out" (names which I shall explain to you later)—will take in from fifteen dollars to five hundred dollars a day. And it is seldom that the trained professional works more than three or four hours a day at his trade.

A Day's Haul.

Five hundred dollars is the biggest single day's "takings" I have ever known. That was gathered in by a "flopper" named Clubfoot Joe at the entrance to a Southern racing track. I once arrested the same man sitting in front of one of our cemeteries. When he was searched at the police station, $147 in small change was unloaded from his pockets.

Only last week a "fit-thrower" pulled his little stunt on the streets of New York. The "small change" of passers-by began to drop beside the spot where he lay in the apparent throes of his attack. A soft-hearted policeman gave him a half-dollar. Then he was recognized by a "plain clothes" member of the police department—and the game was up. In attempting to redistribute their alms to the sympathizers still standing around, the officer found that the young beggar had gathered in ten dollars from less than five minutes of work.

A "flopper," to explain a term that I used a moment ago, is a man or woman who has been maimed by the loss or mutilation of one or more legs, and who sits or "flops" on the sidewalk to beg. It is one of the easiest and most lucrative methods of extracting easy money, for it requires no "patter" and no acting. Moreover, there is no way of faking an amputated limb. The giver is easy in his mind on the score of being imposed upon, and comes across more readily.

One of the "best" floppers I ever knew was a chap who was called "The Plunger," because of his peculiar method of sitting down. When he arrived at the scene of his operations, instead of seating himself slowly and carefully, as most "floppers" do, he would toss down his crutches and plunge to the ground. If this violent method gave him any pain he was insensible to it, and it had the effect at once of gathering a crowd and starting business.

Probably you have heard the old axiom, "Once a beggar, always a beggar." In view of the ease with which money is made by mendicants, do you wonder at it?

Some years ago a wealthy New York man placed five thousand dollars in the hands of myself and my associate, with the provision that we should use the entire sum for reforming beggars. We devoted a goodly part of our time for three years to this charitable mission. As soon as beggars who had been arrested on the street were released from jail, we provided lodgings for them and bought them good clothing. If they needed artificial limbs, we obtained them. If they claimed to have a trade, we bought them the tools for it and found them work. Every man whom we assisted in those three years was back on the streets begging in less than one month.

Don't blame the beggar; blame yourself. As long as a man can

make from one hundred dollars to two hundred and fifty dollars a week by the simple method of holding out his hand for it, he is not likely to turn his talents into other channels. If you would stop distributing money on the street, the most lucrative garden of beggardom would cease to flourish.

Why People Give.

I have often wondered about the impulse that makes the average person give alms to beggars. And I have talked the matter over with beggars with whom I have had enough dealings so that it paid them to be frank. Most people have at least a suspicion that the typical beggar is an impostor—and still they give!

I believe that there are two explanations for this: One is a sort of pride on your part. You hate to have the beggar, and other people think that you "can't afford" to distribute a little spare change. Then the giver of the largess has a little tingle of pride in flinging a small coin with lordly nonchalance to a beggar. "Lucky I've never been reduced to anything like that," he thinks comfortably.

Your other feeling is that, even if the beggar is "on the level," and applies to any of the regular charities for assistance, he will be unduly humiliated and "investigated" before relief is given him. You also have heard that a large part of the money given to organized charities is absorbed in salaries and expenses, and that it does not reach the needy at all. However, as our charities are run today, that suspicion is entirely groundless.

Beggars tend to congregate in cities—the very places where organized charities are on their best footing. This is not because city people are more charitable than country people, but because, in the beggar's parlance, they are "easier." The average New York, Chicago, or San Francisco business man is so busy (or he thinks he is) that it is easier to toss a quarter into a beggar's cap than it is to make any inquiries, or give any thought about whether he deserves it.

Women Shoppers Easy.

Beggars tell me that the "easiest" class of people to "touch" is that composed of women shoppers. Streets where women congregate to purchase in the big stores and well-known shops are gold mines during the shopping hours. I don't know whether women are more gullible than men, or more merciful; but whatever the characteristic is, they give up the money easier.

On the other hand, the writer of begging letters finds his best return in the masculine member of the family. One writer, who passed through my hands, kept a good stock of grocers' bills and dispossess notices on hand. He used to send these out with the letters as an evidence of the genuineness of his need. Men often sent him money; women seldom. On the day he was picked up he had a letter containing a money order for one hundred dollars, which had come in response to one of his appeals.

Another letter writer was in possession of a small book entitled "The Elite Directory." This purported to be a compilation of the names of persons with large purses and soft heads, who would respond to almost anything. It is the only thing in the nature of a "sucker list" that I ever saw. Usually the begging letter writer depends on the daily newspaper for his information, picking out the recipients of legacies, real estate transfers, and miscellaneous smiles of fortune.

The Sixth Sense.

I have asked many beggars how they know which person to approach and which to avoid. I have seen a panhandler standing in a doorway

allow five persons to pass unmolested and tackle the sixth with a request for money; and almost invariably the chosen victim would come across. The beggars themselves either do not know how they make this selection, or know it in such a confused way that they can't explain it. They have invariably told me that they "just felt" which was the right person to approach. It seems to be an instinct which develops with practice.

In my associations with beggars I have uncovered enough romance to fill a dozen story books. Some of them have devised highly novel schemes for separating the public from its money. They are artists in their line. This is particularly true of the "throwout" or the "high-heeler."

A "throw-out" is a beggar who counterfeits partial paralysis. Usually he turns one of his legs inward and drags it stiffly with each step. The shoulder on the same side is slanted down and bent in, and the forearm is held crookedly across the body, with the wrist bent at an acute angle and the fingers spread out clawlike. Try it yourself. You will find that a little practice will enable you to deceive anyone.

Throw-outs of the highest type operate in public conveyances, such as street cars or subway trains. The beggar passes the guard in the crowd as healthy and upright as any of the other passengers, but as he enters the car door he turns up the collar of his coat, dents his hat, ruffles his hair, and "throws out." The effect is startling. It is difficult to believe that it is the same man. His jaunty clothes seem to have suddenly gone old and threadbare and to hang in bags on his pitifully withered and emaciated frame.

The throw-out hobbles down the aisle of the car, depositing on the knee of each passenger a card, on which is usually printed a begging verse. When the deck is all dealt he retraces his steps and picks up the cards again; and nearly always finds a coin on top of each. From two to five dollars is a fair return for working a car.

The "high-heeler" is a throw-out (usually a woman) who adds to her equipment an iron framework some three inches high on one of her feet. Obviously this "heel," which is set askew, forces the wearer to walk with the knee bent at a most uncomfortable angle. The high-heeler also works the street railways, but in a manner differing from that of the throw-out.

Toledo Annie.

One of the best high-heelers I ever knew was called Toledo Annie. She was not more than thirty years old, with a pleasant, smiling expression and a well-bred appearance. She was always neatly dressed and kept her dark hair, which was very fine and abundant, done up in a plain but becoming knot. She wore gold-rimmed spectacles and looked like a school teacher. She possessed the faculty of throwing her hip joint partly out of socket, which greatly exaggerated her apparent deformity. No one, watching her painful progress down a sidewalk or the aisle of a street car, would have doubted that she was the victim of congenital hip disease.

She used to stop a street car and get herself hoisted aboard by the conductor and hobble painfully down the aisle to a seat. The passengers, their attention drawn to her misfortune, watched breathlessly until she was safely seated; and were attracted by her neat appearance and her cheerful smile. They gave her credit for a great deal of pluck, which, indeed, she had!

When the conductor came to collect her fare she would plunge her hand into her skirt pocket and after fumbling about for a moment, with-

draw it empty. At the same time she would stop smiling and begin to fly distress signals. Tears would come to her eyes.

"You will have to let me off," she would say, trying to muster up the smile again. "I'm afraid someone has stolen my pocketbook, and I can't pay my fare."

It would be an ungallant conductor who would not insist on her riding to her destination free, probably adding a few indignant words about the character of any thief who would rob a woman—and a crippled woman at that! Some of the passengers would not be slow to inquire more minutely into the affair, and would be touched to learn that the poor woman had lost her little all.

Don't think that Annie would pour forth her story readily to the first-comer. She was too much of an artist for that. Four or five charitable and well-meaning souls cross-examining in concert were not too many to drag the story piecemeal out of her. The end of the act would find Annie leaving the car full of smiles and tearful gratitude, and richer by anywhere from ten to a hundred dollars. Her smallest taking in a day was eighteen dollars, and her largest a hundred and twenty.

Begging and acting are about the only professions in which you can get a very early start. I have heard of well-known theatrical stars who made their first appearance on the stage in the arms of their nurses. I have known professional beggars who were as young or younger.

Babies for Rent.

Babies a few months old are sometimes rented out to "black-hoods," by their parents, who are themselves professional beggars or very poor people. A black-hood is an old lady who sits on a camp stool in some populous thoroughfare with a crying baby in her lap and a tin cup in her hand. She gets her name from the fact that she wears a hood of dark material, from under which peep out a few wisps of gray hair. These hoods, with the hair attached if desired, can be purchased in certain shops well known to the fraternity.

The life of an assistant to a black-hood is not an easy one. If you remember having given anything to that sort of beggar you will recollect that the baby was always crying. This flood of infantile tears works on the sympathy of the passer-by and he is more liberal than he would be if the baby were well-fed and smiling. But even little beggar babies do not cry all the time without some inducement. The black-hood, to make the child weep, uses methods more simple and more efficacious than the glycerin dodge of the movies: she either pricks it sharply with a pin, or drops it on the sidewalk, and, like some well-wound-up musical instrument, the wretched youngster will cry for some time without any intermission at all.

Some years ago, there was in Brooklyn a "headquarters," or beggar's lodging-house, kept by a man and woman called Liverpool Harry and Canton Nettie. The house had two entrances, and at night, when the inmates began to return, Liverpool would take his stand at one door and Nettie at the other, and each lodger handed over a dollar as he or she passed in. As there were fifty-eight beggars in the house at the time it was broken up, the income of the headquarters was not insignificant.

Of course at night the house was in an uproar. There was not one of the lodgers who did not have a larger income than the average professional man, and beggars, like criminals, get money only to spend it. A great many fights occurred growing out of a difference of opinion over the value of a poker hand or the reading of dice.

The beggars who frequented Liverpool's place were of the aristocracy of mendicancy. There were "floppers," "fit-throwers," "high-heelers," "throw-outs," and "office-building" men among them, but no "panhandlers," who are the lowest type of mendicants.

The "panhandler" is the chap who falls into step with you on the street and whines out a request for a dime for a cup of coffee. His takings are small, because he is easily satisfied. Enough for a cheap lodging and a meal of broken victuals satisfies him. In the summer time he travels through the country.

How One Professional Started.

There are more men than women beggars, but some of the women are inordinately clever. I remember one woman worker, whom I heard of, off and on, for years, while she was "doing" Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, and other Middle-Western cities. When I ran across her in New York, not long ago, I was genuinely interested to learn her story.

She is a pretty, well-dressed girl, about twenty-five years old. As I came upon her, seated on a curbstone, I dropped a coin into her lap, and then said:

"Come around the corner! I want to talk with you!"

She looked up fearfully, and in a very low voice said:

"Are you an officer?"

I told her that I was, but as I was off my beat she had nothing to fear from me; that I only wanted a few minutes' conversation with her.

Much reassured she got up and came around the corner. Presently I drew out of her the story of her life.

She had been running a millinery shop in a Western city when she married. After her marriage she continued to keep the shop. One day, while unpacking a shipment, she stepped on one of the nails in the packing case, and it went through the thin sole of her shoe and deep into her foot. Blood poisoning followed, and the leg had to be amputated at the thigh.

The expense of the accident soon ate up what money they had saved, and in her absence her business fell off so much that her creditors closed the shop. Her husband, it seems, cracked under the strain of taking care of his maimed wife on an insufficient salary, and left her.

For some time after she was discharged from the hospital she lived with a friend and tried desperately to find some means of earning a living. She did not have the capital to reopen her shop and was unable to borrow it. It is strange that society, which readily pays this girl eight to ten thousand dollars a year for sitting on the sidewalk, could not find a few dollars to put her honestly to work.

Her begging commenced by accident. She had tried too long a walk on her crutches before she was hardened to them, and became so exhausted that she sank down on the sidewalk with her back to a building to keep from fainting. As she sat there a well-dressed gentleman passed her, paused, dropped a bill into her lap and walked on before she could do anything.

She felt a good deal of shame, but she kept the money, and as times got harder the thought of it constantly recurred to her. Finally she "flopped" on a quiet street, and in a short time had five or six dollars in change. Next day she went to a busier street. Before the authorities requested her to leave town she was a confirmed "flopper," and one of the most successful in the business.

She lives alone and I think is saving her money; and her morals, no doubt, are above reproach. But until she has made her stake she will always be a beggar. They don't change. As long as it is so easy they will never reform.

School for Beggars.

There used to be a school in Brooklyn where the fakers were prepared for begging. Here the deaf and dumb men were taught the "stare" which is considered an indispensable part of the "dummy's" outfit. Rising youngsters and new recruits were taught the throw-out and the use of the "heel." Fake sores, made with acid and vaseline, were supplied. Legs and arms were put in plaster casts, with a convenient hinge by means of which they could be removed when business hours were over. This place was broken up some years ago; but I understand, from the beggars themselves, that similar institutions are running in other cities now.

While most beggars, as might be expected, are not of a high order of intelligence, the fraternity contains some men of astonishing personality and education. One chap, a fit-thrower, was one of the cleverest men, in his understanding of human nature and his ability to play a part, that I ever met in any profession, legitimate or otherwise.

This man's moniker, or professional nickname, was "Handsome Harry." He was a tall, slender Englishman, with a drooping yellow mustache, an aristocratic accent, and regular features. He had been a soldier in the Boer War, and had been seriously wounded in the head by a shell fragment.

To save his life the surgeons had set a silver plate, about two inches square, into the back of his skull, and this plate was covered with flesh only around the edges.

Harry liked to operate on Chambers street, in New York. He used to stroll down the sidewalk until the people passing him were of the right type. Then, with a gurgling cry, he would throw himself backward so that the plate in the back of his head struck the sidewalk with great violence and a prodigious noise. Then he would lie still.

Nearly always he was picked up by his chosen "customers" and revived. He would admit, in a confused sort of way, that his faintness came from hunger. His well-bred appearance, coupled with his fainting fit, seldom failed to wring from ten to twenty dollars from his good Samaritans.

"The plate," he confided to me, "is quite an asset. They always notice it, of course, and that helps my patter. But I have to be pretty careful. If I revive too quickly they are not sorry enough to shell out the coin, and if I revive too slowly, some fool will call an ambulance!"

Of course, I condemn begging, and it is my business to eradicate it in Brooklyn. According to all reports, I have succeeded pretty well in so doing. Yet I cannot help feeling a certain sort of sympathy for beggars. This is not so much sentimentality as something akin to the way a scientist feels about the apparatus in his laboratory. I get my reactions in human nature.

My experience has not made me cynical. Some of the beggars are merely good-natured, likable drifters, who have followed the easiest current. I continue helping them to honest jobs, and I still expect to find one who will permanently reform.

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